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COVERT OPERATIONS

CIA's Latin actions open old wounds in Washington

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WASHINGTON—In one of those ironic twists that are becoming common in world affairs, the Central Intelligence Agency helped put mines in the ports of Nicaragua—and they blew up in Washington.

The political explosions in Congress over the mining operation could do more damage to the Reagan administration's foreign policy than is being done to ships in Nicaraguan harbors. With debate over the recent debacle in Lebanon barely subsiding, the mining issue has embroiled President Reagan and Congress in yet another dispute about the exercise of American power abroad.

The issue is the CIA's supposedly covert support for antigovernment Nicaraguan rebels. The administration doesn't publicly admit lending the support, but nobody bothers denying it, either.

Admitted or not, there has been little more than a charade of secrecy for some time about the CIA's role in financing and training the "Contras," actually several separate anti-Sandinista groups that together have about 10,000 fighters staging attacks from sanctuaries in neighboring Honduras.

But many angry members of Congress said they didn't know until newspaper disclosures last week that the CIA's not-so-secret war also included the mining of Nicaragua's three main harbors, which has so far damaged at least six cargo ships, including a Soviet oil tanker; brought protests from at least three allies, Britain, France and Canada; and provoked a formal complaint by Nicaragua to the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

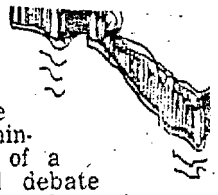
CIA DIRECTOR William Casey, dispatched to Capitol Hill by the White House in an effort to calm Congress, confirmed to lawmakers behind closed doors that CIA personnel were directly involved in the mining, which he said was an effort to disrupt Nicaragua's supplies of weapons from Cuba and the Soviet Union. Casey, seeking approval of $21 million in additional support for the anti-Sandinista guerrillas, said the Contras are necessary to cut the weapons flow from the Marxist Nicaraguan government to the leftist insurgents in El Salvador.

Congress told Reagan last year not to attempt to topple the Sandinistas, and the administration has asserted that it supports the Contras only as far as putting pressure on Managua to stop supporting insurgents elsewhere in Central America. But the mining, which was being called both an "act of war" and "state-sponsored terrorism," apparently went beyond the bounds of what Congress would accept.

"We have employed tactics we condemn others for," said Sen. Larry Pressler [R., S.D.], as part of the bipartisan chorus of criticism about the mining that appeared to doom future funding for the Contras.

The administration was surprised by the uproar, considering the mining to be nothing more than continued U.S. harassment of the Sandinistas, whom the White House contends are trying topple the U.S.-supported government of neighboring El Salvador. Sources said the mines were designed to produce more noise than damage to vessels, and were placed in such a way to avoid violating the letter, if not the spirit, of international law.

"In my estimation, we declared war on Nicaragua and haven't told the world about it," said Adm. [ret.] Eugene Carroll Jr. of the private Center for Defense Information.



ALL THIS couldn't have come at a worse time for the Reagan administration—in the midst of a partisan congressional debate about Central American policies in general and on the heels of the President's repeated denunciations of state-sponsored terrorism by others.

"The American public is chagrined to realize it is doing state terrorism because they all agreed with the President when he condemned Syria and Iran for doing it," said Adm. [ret.] Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA in the Carter administration.

The debate over covert actions contains echoes of past CIA operations in places like Cuba, Laos, Angola, the Congo [now Zaire] and Guatemala, where the United States has employed covert means in an effort to alter events more to Washington's liking.

Now, as then, the basic question is whether it is ever wise, moral or even feasible for the United States to secretly interfere in another country's internal affairs to promote American foreign policy aims. Are such things as propaganda, secret financial aid and covert support for paramilitary groups acceptable tools of American foreign policy? Is it realistic to believe that an open society such as this can operate in secret for any length of time before the activities become widely known?

"You've got to be able to do covert activities from time to time," Turner said. "It's a perfectly legitimate tool of foreign policy. It just hasn't been particularly well used in Nicaragua."

WHERE THE ADMINISTRATION has erred, he said, is in proceeding with an operation that was controversial from the start, had undefined goals and lacked broad support even within the congressional intelligence committees responsible for monitoring CIA operations.

In contrast, he points out, "I don't hear anyone complaining about possible covert aid to the Afghan rebels."

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